Title: The Religion of Death in *A Farewell to Arms*

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[In the following excerpt, Light follows Henry's vacillation between four types of service—religion, country, spouse, mankind—before rejecting all ideals of service to anything.]

One way of looking at Ernest Hemingway's ***A Farewell to Arms*** is to see its close involvement in four ideals of service. Each of these ideals is dramatized by a character of some importance, and it is between these four that Lt. Henry wavers in the course of the novel. The orthodoxy religious ideal of service is that of the Priest, who wishes to serve God but who asserts as well the broader concept of service: “When you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve.” Another selfless ideal of service is that of the patriot Gino, who wishes to serve his country so fully that he is willing to die for it. A third is the code of Catherine Barkley, who wishes to serve her lover and who sees in such service her personal substitute for conventional religion. The last is the ideal of Rinaldi, who, as a doctor, wishes to serve mankind by alleviating the wounds of war. Each is an initiate to the subordination of self, and in this they differ from the selfishness of the king and the officers who ride in cars and throw mud on the men, or from the hero Ettore, who sees war as an accident suitable for promotion and self-glorification. In no other way, despite the contention of such a perceptive and influential critic as Robert Penn Warren , are they really initiates. They are not so in their greater discipline—Catherine is hysterical early in the novel and Rinaldi is a nervous wreck in the middle They are not so in their talk, [according to Warren in his introduction to Hemingway's ***A Farewell to Arms*** (1949)] for though Rinaldi and Valentini, another doctor and another so-called initiate, may possess a similar “bantering, ironical tone,” the Priest and Catherine are far removed from any such tone; nor do they have any greater awareness than others “of the issue of meaning in life.” They act instinctively rather than intellectually, and the one instinct they have in common—the attraction toward the ideal of service—is, from the context and the conclusion of the novel, a foolish selflessness without intellectual worth.

The Priest, Gino, Catherine, and Rinaldi do, however, live by the ideal of service, and the dramatic tension of the novel is largely based on Lt. Henry's wavering toward each ideal and eventual rejection of all four. Toward the Priest's ideal, Henry's attitude is at first one of sympathy but of rejection. He does not bait the Priest with the other priest-baiters early in the novel, but neither does he stay with the Priest when the other officers leave for the whore houses near by. Nor does he visit the high, cold, dry country. the Priest's home, where he is invited to go on his leave. Instead he goes to the large cities, the ironic “centres of culture and civilization,” where he lives the life of sensation and feels “that this was all and all and all and not caring.” After he is wounded and has found real love with Catherine, however, Lt. Henry comes closer to the Priest, so that when he returns to duty he can reject the priest-baiting of Rinaldi and instead of going to town—and the whore houses—he can visit with the Priest. The implication apparently is that the love Henry has found in Catherine has somehow made him more sympathetic to the kind of selfless love that the Priest avows. By the end of the novel, however, Henry has thoroughly rejected the Priest and his ideal of service to God. He does, however, give that ideal a test. Where the Priest had earlier prayed for the end of the war—“I believe and I pray that something will happen. I have felt it very close.” Henry now prays that Catherine not die. Basic and repetitive in the prayer is the implication of some necessary reciprocal relation between man and God: you do this for me and I'll do this for you. Thus Henry prays: “Oh, God, please don't let her die. I'll do anything for you if you won't let her die....Please, please, please don't let her die....I'll do anything you say if you don't make her die”. Catherine, however, does die, just as, despite the Priest's prayers, the war continues. The implication is that the Priest's ideal of service lacks reciprocity, and the knowledge of its lack is not unique to Henry. Huck Finn had earlier, in the novel that Hemingway has said is the origin of all modern American literature, felt the same flaw; for he had seen, by pragmatic test, the inefficacy of prayer, and he had discerned that the Priest's—or Miss Watson's—ideal of service was a oneway street with no advantage for the human individual For Lt. Henry this lack of reciprocity makes for the image of a God who in his eternal selfishness is the origin of human selfishness, so that man in his selfishness most accurately reflects God. This concept of the divine selfishness is portrayed in Henry's remembrance, as Catherine is dying, of watching some ants burning on a log. Henry envisions the opportunity for him to be “a messiah and lift the log off the fire.” Divinity, however, does not ease the pain of man's existence, and Henry does not save the ants. Instead, selfishly—and in so doing he is reflecting the divine selfishness which is so antithetical to the Priest's ideal of service—Henry throws “a tin cup of water on the log, so that I would have the cup empty to put whiskey in before I added water to it.”

A second ideal of service is that dramatized by the patriot Gino. He believes the “soil is sacred” and that the deaths in the war were not “in vain.” He will not talk of losing the war and Lt. Henry feels he understands Gino's “being a patriot. He was born one.” Though Lt. Henry never has Gino's simple love of country, he does for a good part of the novel act and talk as a “patriot.” The priest applies the term to Lt. Henry and its justification, despite the fact that Lt. Henry is not defending his own country, is shown in an early conversation of Lt. Henry with the mechanic Passini. Passini believes there is nothing worse than war, but Lt. Henry contradicts this by saying, “Defeat is worse.” Passini says people should defend their own homes, and sisters should be kept in the house. The disagreement concludes with Lt. Henry saying that the war is bad but it must be finished. Passini answers, “It doesn't finish. There is no finish to a war.” The innocence of Lt. Henry is revealed when he says, “Yes, there is.” In terms of the ultimate despair of the book, with its cry that life itself, from birth to death, is perpetual war, Lt. Henry's statement shows a naivete that Lt. Henry must—and does—lose. His loss begins when the real danger and killing of the war become apparent. (Earlier he had felt the war “seemed no more dangerous to me myself than war in the movies.” His loss of innocence is most obvious when he feels himself completely separated from the patriot Gino and responds to Gino's cliches by the famous passage that begins, “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice, and the expression in vain...” Because he has lost his patriotism, Lt. Henry, later, has no intellectual qualms about deserting and making a “separate peace”.

A third ideal of service is the ideal of which Catherine lives. She dramatizes the service of secular lovers to one another, and she lives and dies by this code. Completely selfless in her attitude toward her lover, she needs no marriage ceremony and dreams of uniting herself so completely to Lt. Henry—her religion she calls him at one time—that the two become truly one. The depth of the desire to serve is shown in the last chapter. There, Lt. Henry takes Catherine's hand. She knows that she is going to die and also feels that her recent agony in childbirth and her impending death are the final results for her of the sexual desires of Henry. Therefore, she lashes out: “Don't touch me” Then, despite her bitterness, she adds, “Poor darling. You touch me all you want.” This is perfect selflessness, still concerned with others, still trying to serve even while dying, and it is this kind of service that Henry learns about from Catherine. Thus while rowing Catherine to Switzerland, Henry can blister his hands to the point of real pain, and then can jestingly refer to his own hands as similar to those of Christ. Later, when Catherine is dying, Henry desperately wishes to serve, and this he does in some small way by giving her gas to ease her pain. Of this act, he feels, “It was very good of the doctor to let me do something.” Later Henry asks such questions as, “Do you want anything, Cat?” and “Can I get you anything?” Henry, however, can do nothing, and the ineffectuality of the service of secular lovers is made apparent in the last paragraph of the novel when Henry finds he can't even effectively say goodbye.

The fourth ideal of service is that of Rinaldi. Rinaldi is a good doctor, one for whom work is the sole justification for life. It is Rinaldi to whom Henry is closest at the beginning of the novel—Rinaldi says they are blood brothers—for both are not only living a life of non-thinking sensation, but more important both are involved in the service of healing man's body. After Henry has been wounded and has returned to duty, however, there is a change. Henry finds that the Priest now is more sure of himself, while Rinaldi, convinced that he has syphilis, is tense and irritable. The cause for the change is the way in which the war has been going. Many men have been killed and many wounded, and these facts have made the Priest—concerned with man's soul—feel more necessary, while at the same time, they have made Rinaldi—concerned with man's body—feel his own futility. The difference is made clear when Rinaldi attempts to bait the priest, as in earlier days, and is unsuccessful in weakening the Priest's placidity. His lack of success, though his insults go even beyond those of the earlier time, and his feeling that Henry is betraying him and is new on the Priest's side enrage Rinaldi, and he yells at Henry that he can't side with the Priest:“You can't do it. You can't do it. I say you can't do it. You're dry and you're empty and there's nothing else. There's nothing else I tell you. Not a damned thing. I know, when I stop working.” The complete materialist—he calls himself “the snake of reason”—Rinaldi, fter this scene, disappears physically from the novel, but his role as the worker for the cure of man's body is assumed later by another doctor, the one who cares for Catherine in her childbirth. Like Rinaldi, this doctor is also ineffectual in his attempt at service, and his feeling of his failure leads to apologies which Henry rejects. Henry is left with the failure of all the ideals of service. In addition he is left with the knowledge of the one thing man can believe in: death. Catherine becomes a “statue”—which suggests some pagan deity—and the novel ends on the word *rain*, a word which symbolically stands for two things, paradoxically intertwined, in the novel. One is spring and new birth. The other is the thaws of spring that begin the war anew and anew bring death. In the beginning of life, then, is the fact of death, and the sexual urge is the biological trap which leads to death. Death is the basic fact of life.

The imagery of the novel, from beginning to end, insists upon the tragic fusion of birth and destruction—as, for instance, in the first chapter, in which the cartridge boxes of marching soldiers make their capes bulge so that the mud-bedraggled warriors “Marched as though they were six months gone with child”. Or Hemingway makes the same point, through images with Freudian sexual overtones, when he has Lt. Henry, while walking with Catherine, stop to buy a gun, holster it, comment upon his now being “fully armed” and then takes his beloved to a hotel to enjoy the “good destruction”—a common phrase of the two lovers—before he must return to a different kind of destruction at the front. Or most poignantly the fused imagery of birth and death is dramatized by a single image of Catherine's child: the birth cord, as Lt. Henry imagines, is around its neck and the cord is slowly choking the infant to death from the moment of its first kick inside the mother's body. Such an image evokes man's universal fate, for life itself—as Lt. Henry phrases it—is merely “all this dying to go through.”...

Watching the bullfights, Hemingway gains a feeling of “life and death, mortality and immortality.” Though he himself is vague about the reason he gains these feelings, it seems clear that the feeling of immortality does not come from any orthodox Christian reason. Instead it arises because the bullfighter, when he enters the area of danger, shows his contempt for death, becomes victorious over it, and gains in his victory a small immortality. The same kind of contempt for death is evident in the way in which Catherine meets her end, for she recognizes her death as a “dirty trick” but winks at the joke. She has not been broken by death, despite her feeling to the contrary, and she has therefore gained victory and immortality. This is the only kind of immortality man can know; it is gained by bravery and stoicism, not selfless service to God (the Priest), country (Gino), beloved (Catherine), or mankind (Rinaldi). Such a limited immortality is a poor substitute for victory over death through everlasting life; but it is the only kind of immortality, the only kind of religion, the Hemingway of ***Farewell*** can believe in.

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